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ABSTRACT

Aspects of the Vietnamese language are introduced in this manual for inservice teacher training. The development of Vietnamese as it was influenced by other Austro-Asiatic languages is discussed. A brief modern history of the language emphasizes contact with Chinese, English, and French. The replacement of Chinese characters with the Roman alphabet is described. The sound system of Vietnamese (which is a tone language) is tabulated, as are the alphabet, vowel sounds, diphthongs, and consonants. (JB)

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INTRODUCTION TO THE VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE

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INTRODUCTION TO VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE

by Chinh Ba Nguyen.

The Vietnamese language is probably Austro-Asiatic in origin. It has been enriched by numberless Chinese words and expressions, but it is not recognized by Orientalists as having its origins in the Chinese language. Vietnamese language belongs to the Pegouan, Thai or Mon-Khmer group. Sir Henry Maspero maintained that it is of Thai origin, and the Reverend Father Souvignet traced it to the Indo-Malay group. A.G. Haudricourt has recently denied the thesis of Maspero and concluded that Vietnamese is properly placed in the Austro-Asiatic family. None of these theories quite explain the origin of the Vietnamese language. One thing, however, remains certain: Vietnamese is not a pure language. It seems to be a blend of several languages, ancient and modern, encountered throughout history following successive contacts between foreign peoples and people of Vietnam.

Comparative linguistics has uncovered quite a regular correspondence between certain phonemes of the Vietnamese language and of the Austro-Asiatic language group. But this evidence does not allow us to conclude that Vietnamese, and vocables of the Austro-Asiatic group are to be placed in the same family. To begin with, most words of the Austro-Asiatic family are polysyllables with prefix and suffix adjuncts. Next, only morphological study can establish clearly the relationship between the two groups; but unfortunately Austro-Asiatic morphology has not yet reached its full development. Under such conditions, it is not now possible to make a substantial and effective comparison between Vietnamese and the Austro-Asiatic languages. Nevertheless, lexicologists have maintained that the Austro-Asiatic element has certainly played an important role in the formation of Vietnamese words. In the domain of ethnology, archaeology and sociology, irrefutable evidence has been discovered that the Vietnamese people made contact with Austro-Asiatic races (Negroids, Melanesians and Indenosians) in antiquity. It is quite natural that these contacts would manifest themselves in the Vietnamese language. In prehistoric times, Vietnam must have been inhabited by an autochthonous race whose blood undoubtedly mingled with that of other races who immigrated there.

The first of such races who immigrated there were the Melanesians. They were followed in the second century B.C. by the Indonesians. Vietnam was enriched with new words from each successive wave of immigrants. The greater part of the words which these newcomers gave our language were words pertaining to mountains, flowers, animals and the like.

Such was the character of the Vietnamese language before its contact with Chinese culture. Then came the period of Chinese domination, of the dynasties of the Tchaos, the Hans, the Wous, the T'sins, the Leangs, the T'angs, and of the Mings. Chinese culture had a golden opportunity to spread among the Vietnamese people and a large quantity of Chinese words, generally in the fields of philosophy and morals, were introduced into our language. But the words borrowed from the Chinese, exactly like those of Austro-Asiatic origin, have become Vietnamese. The Chinese language, once Vietnamized, with its foreign accent removed, would be listened to with pleasure: the people of Vietnam would find no trace of cacophony in it.

As for other linguistic contributions, Vietnamese has been enriched with words from French and from English. Initially, these words represented new objects or new functions previously unfamiliar to the people of Vietnam. Later, technical and scientific words were added. Like the earlier words from other languages, these new French and English words were Vietnamized in their turn.

During the course of the 17th century, Alexandre de Rhodes, one among many European missionaries arrived to preach Christianity in Vietnam and the Far East. The missionary developed a new writing system for Vietnamese in order to facilitate their evangelical work. The new writing system was an adaptation, called romanized. At first used only among the Christians in Vietnam, it soon spread to the rest of the population. By the beginning of this century, it became the official form for representing the language, known as QUỐC-NGỮ or national language.

While it took years to master the Chinese script and use it to write Vietnamese, it now takes an average adult Vietnamese learner from only three to six months to learn to read and write Vietnamese. The present writing system represents rather closely the spoken form of Vietnamese, especially the Northern dialect.

The Roman alphabet does not contain any means to express tones. So, to overcome this difficulty, the designers of the Vietnamese script used a set of diacritical marks over or under the vowel letters to mark the different

tones. Other additional diacritical marks were used to make up new vowel letters to represent sounds not found in European languages. In the same way, new combinations of sonsonant letters were to represent some consonantal sounds in Vietnamese.

The following sketch of the structure of Vietnamese is intended to give Americans a very rough impression of the sound system and grammar of the language, so that they will have an idea of what to expect during the first attempts at speaking Vietnamese. There are complete reference grammars and courses available in the bilingual/ESL Center Library, New Holland.

VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE SOUND SYSTEM

Vietnamese languages were spoken differently among the peoples of the three parts of the country: Northern dialect, Central dialect, and Southern dialect. While the grammars of the three dialects are the same, with a few minor variations in the use of regional vocabulary, the phonologies, or sound systems, show wider variations.

The Northern dialect has six tones: -

(mid-level , high-rising, low-falling, mid-rising, low-up rising, low-rising)

cung	bằng ,	sắc	huyền	hỏi	ngã	nặng
Ex:	a ,	á ,	à ,	ả ,	ã ,	ạ

The Southern dialect has five tones:

(mid-level , high-rising, low-falling, mid-rising, and low-rising)

cung	bằng ,	sắc ,	huyền .	hỏi ,	nặng
Ex:	ma ,	má ,	mà ,	ma ,	ma

and the Central dialect has only four tones which are not parallel to those in the other two (Northern and Southern). There are also dialectical differences in vowels and consonants. When the Central people speak Vietnamese, both Northerners and Southerners are scarcely able to understand each other.

This program will guide you to speak the correct six-tone Vietnamese language.

Vietnamese is a monosyllabic language. It is to say, each word in Vietnamese supposedly consists of only one syllable. There are also mono- and polysyllabic words in Vietnamese, as there are in English. But in English orthography, the syllables of a polysyllabic word are written together, (for example: important = quan trong, reconstruction = tái thiết) in Vietnamese orthography, they are written separately, or hyphenated.

The Vietnamese system of spelling is by and large "phonetic"; in other words, one letter is used to represent one distinct sound, and each distinct sound is represented by only one letter or combination of letters.

VIETNAMESE ALPHABET

There are 23 letters in the Vietnamese Alphabet:

A	B	C	D	Đ	E	G	H	I	K	L
a	b	c	d	đ	e	g	h	i	k	l
M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	X
m	n	o	p	q	r	s	t	u	v	x

Y
y

VOWELS

There are 11 single vowels

Letter	sound	Example
a	Bostonian a as in car, far	ca - sing
ă	like a with rising sound	ăn - eat
â	like with high-rising	ân - grace
e	as "fair"	xe - car
ê	as in day	bên - side
i,y	as in "fee"	bi - marble, ly - glass
o	as in "door"	to - big
ô	as in "so"	xô - push
ơ	as in "love"	mơ - dream
u	as in too	phu - coolie
ư	like oo sound but spread the lips horizontally	thư - letter (mail)

DIPHTHONGS

A diphthong is a combination of different vowel sounds occurring within a single syllable. Some of the single Vietnamese vowel symbols already introduced sometimes represent diphthongs. For example, the symbol -i in final position in Vietnamese often represents a diphthong - one which begins with the -i vowel as described and glides to a slightly higher position. Thus, not all Vietnamese diphthongs are indicated in the spelling system. However, certain spelling combination regularly represent diphthongs and such diphthongs contrast meaningfully with simple vowels. This section treats such combinations.

The following alphabetically-arranged table lists possible clusters of vowels and final consonants. The dash preceding each cluster means that the cluster is always preceded by a consonant. The dash in parentheses means that the cluster can exist either as a syllable or word with or without being preceded by a consonant. The pronunciation of each cluster is a combination of the pronunciation of the individual sounds in that cluster.

Vietnamese spelling :	Pronunciation:	Spelling :	: Meaning
(-)a	aH	a	Ah!
		ba,ca,ma	three,sing,ghost
(-)ai	aHee	ai	who
		tai,mai,sai	ear,tomorrow, wrong
(-)ao	aHw	ao	pond
		bao,cao,sao	cover,high,why
(-)au	aHw (short)	mau,lau,sau	fast,clean,behind
(-)ay	ay	bay,cay,tay	fly,hot,hand
(-)ăn	and	ăn, săn	eat, hunt
(-)âu	w	câu,lâu, sâu	sentence,long,time, deep
(-)eo	eHw	eo	trait
		beo,meo,keo	panther,musty,glue
(-)ia	i	bia, tia, nia	target,ray,flat basket
(-)iêc	i k	biếc, liếc, xiếc	azure,to glance, circus
(-)iêu	eew	kiêu, tiêu, niêu	haughty, flute,small pot

VN Spelling:	Pronunciation:	Spelling:	Meaning:
(-)iu	EEW	diu dìu	to calm down
(-)o	aw	ho,lo,no	cough,anxious,full
(-)oa	waH	hoa,loạ,xoa	flower,megaphone,rub
(-)oai	waHee	oai,toại	majestic, satisfied
(-)oay	way	loạy hoạy	very busy with stg.
(-)oắc	wak	quắc, hoặc	flashing,either...or
(-)oe	weH	toe	splash
(-)oi	oy	coi,hoi hổp	look, weakly
(-)ỗi	oHee	bỗi, tỗi, xỗi	efface,me,sticky rice
(-)ua	waH	cua, tua	crab, turn.
(-)uê	wei	quê	native country
(-)ui	ooy	lui	to move back
(-)uỗi	ooway	nuỗi, đuỗi	to nourish, tail
(-)uy	wee	uy, tuy	power and prestige, although
(-)uya	wi	khuya	to be late at night
(-)uyên	wi ng	khuyên, xuyên	to advise, through
(-)uyu	weew	khuỷu	elbow
(-)ươi	ewoy	tươi	to be fresh
(-)ươu	ewew	hươu	deer
(-)ưu	eww	ưu	excellent
yêu	eew	yêu	to love

These diphthongs are the main ones to form words with different tones by adding different consonants. (We will see them in further lessons)

CONSONANTS

Vietnamese spelling	Pronunciation	Examples	Meaning
b-	b as in bed	ba, beo, bát, bán	three,panther,bowl,sell
c + vowels	k as in car	ca, công, cung	sing, peacock, bow
ch-	ch as in chair	cha, cho, che	father,give, cover

Vietnamese spelling	Pronunciation	Example	Meaning
đ-	as in jaz	đa, đê, đu hý	skin,goat,amusement
đ-	as in do	đá, đu, đốt	stone, swing, burn
g- gh-	as in go	ga, ghe, ghi	railway station,sampan to record
gi-	as in jazz	giam giữ, giờ	to detain, hour
h-	as in hat	hát, hốt, hoa	sing,whistle,flower
h+diphthong	as wWhat	hoang, huyền	wild, jet-black
k+i,y,e,e kh-	as in key	Kinh, kêu, keo, ký	prayer,call,glue,sign
l-	as in long	lên, lo, lau	go up, worry, clean
m-	as in mine	ma, mặn, mù	ghost, salty, blind
n-	as in no	nóng, no, nón	hot, full, hat
* ng-		ngà, ngủ, ngô	ivory, sleep, corn
nh-	as in n (Spanish)	nhà, nhỏ, nhất	house, small, first
ngh-before vowels (i,e,e)		nghi,nghe, nghề	think, listen,occupation
ph-	as in fat	pha, phu, phút	to mix, laborer, minute
qu-	as in kw	quả, quý, quỉ	fruit, precious, demon
r-	as in rat	ra, rán, rận	go out, to fry, louse
s-	as in shut	sa, sai, súng	to fall, wrong, gun
t-	as in top	ta, tội, tạ từ	an apology, to thank
th-	as in	thọ thai, thịt	become pregnant, meat
tr-	as in entry	trà, trẻ, trăm	tea, young, hundred
v-	as in vain	vào, và, vàng	enter, and yellow
x-	as in see	xem, xong, sườn	see,finished, bone

Vietnamese consonants appear often at the beginning or at the end of the Vietnamese spelling. Ex.:

* nh+a +nh ng- the two consonants may appear in one word as in "nhanh" - fast may not be before i,e,e but other vowels.

Vietnamese language is lightly similar to Spanish or Latin. The difficulty is only from its tones. But be patient, you may speak Vietnamese in three months of learning. You will have more friends in a short time.

THE END OF THE INTRODUCTION OF VIETNAMESE LANGUAGE